

Spotlight on Health

Cervical Cancer Screening

Since the Pap test was introduced, the number of women who develop cervical cancer has decreased dramatically. As a result, many lives have been saved. Around the year 2000, it became clear that a virus causes most cervical cancers. This virus is called the human papillomavirus (HPV). After this discovery, doctors started to use an HPV test for screening. When an HPV test is used with a Pap test, doctors call it a co-test.

This newsletter will help you understand the importance of cervical cancer screening. It will also discuss Pap testing, HPV testing, and co-testing.

Cervical Cancer and What Causes It

The lowest part of the uterus (womb) is called the cervix. HPV is a common virus that is mostly spread during sexual contact. Cancer of the cervix is usually caused by infection with certain types of HPV.¹ These are called high-risk types. Other types of HPV can cause genital warts, but do not cause cancer. Both males and females can be infected and spread the virus. Consistent and proper use of condoms reduces the spread of HPV. But condoms are not 100% effective. Most HPV infections go away on their own, and do not cause any problems. But when they don't, they can cause changes in cervical cells. These changes may eventually lead to cancer.^{1,2}

It is important to know that HPV is different from HIV/AIDS, and from herpes (HSV). HPV is so common that almost every person who is sexually-active will get it at some time in their life.³ Most people will never know that they ever had an infection.

Cervical Cancer Screening

Doctors use screening to detect cervical cancer in women who have no signs of it. It takes a long time for the cells of the cervix to become cancerous. The Pap test detects abnormal cells that may turn into cancer.⁴ This allows doctors to remove the abnormal cells before they become cancer. The earlier a precancer is found, the better it can be treated.⁴ The HPV test shows if cells have been infected with the virus. An infection means cells may be more likely to develop into a cancer.

A positive result on a screening test does not necessarily mean there is cancer. Your doctor will decide if any other testing or treatment is needed.

Co-testing and Cervical Cancer Screening Guidelines

Medical organizations like the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) publish guidelines that help doctors understand the best way to use a test or treat a disease. ACOG offers clear guidance on cervical cancer screening, which may include more than one test at the same time.

Co-testing is cervical cancer screening that includes both an HPV test and a Pap test ordered together. The age-range for women to be screened for cervical cancer is between 21 and 65. Co-testing is recommended for women ages 30 to 65. *In fact, the ACOG says it is the preferred test.*⁴ In this age group, fewer HPV infections go away on their own. For this reason, risk for cancer is higher.

Using both the HPV and the Pap test helps to:

- Detect abnormal precancer cells earlier than Pap testing alone
- Detect some types of cervical cancer that are not detected by the Pap test alone
- Possibly decrease the frequency of screening needed



Why Screening for Cervical Cancer Is So Important

Cervical cancer used to be the number 1 cause of cancer death in women in the United States.

Screening with the Pap test greatly reduced the number of women who get cervical cancer.⁷ But not all women get screened regularly, and about half of all cervical cancers happen in women who have never been screened.⁵ Another 10% occur in women who haven't been screened in the last 5 years.⁵

While Pap alone testing every three years is recommended for women ages 21 to 29, co-testing is not.^{3,4} About 90% of HPV infections in women ages 21 to 29 go away by themselves.² Because of this, the risk for cervical cancer is very low. Most HPV infections in this age group will often go away on their own.

No screening is needed for women more than 65 years of age if they have a low cancer risk.

HPV Vaccine

A vaccine is available in the United States that helps protect against the HPV high-risk types that cause cancer. The vaccine also helps protect against the types that cause genital warts.⁶ The vaccine is recommended for males and females ages 9 to 26 years of age. Males cannot get cervical cancer, but they can be infected with the HPV types that cause cancer and genital warts. Males can be infected and not know it. If they are infected they can pass the infection to women through sex. Vaccinating males also helps protect women.

What You Can Do

If you are between the ages of 21 and 65, regular screening should be part of your personal healthcare. Talk with your doctor about what kind of cervical cancer screening is best for you. Remember, cervical cancer screening isn't recommended to be done every year. But it is important that you still get a well-woman exam each year. It includes a variety of screening, evaluation, and counseling. An annual check-up gives your doctor a chance to evaluate your overall health. This can help uncover any health problems early on.

If you are 26 years of age or younger, getting an HPV vaccine is another step you can take. It lowers your risk of cervical cancer.

How the Laboratory Can Help

The laboratory plays a big role in cervical cancer screening. When it is time to be screened, your doctor will collect some cells from your cervix. The specimen is then sent to the laboratory for testing. The laboratory can do both the Pap test and the HPV test. If the HPV test is positive, other tests can be done to determine what type of HPV it is. It is important to know if it is a high-risk type. The laboratory can also test for sexually transmitted diseases if your doctor thinks this is necessary.

Additional Information

For more information, visit Quest Diagnostics at <http://www.questdiagnostics.com/home/patients/health-test-info/cancer/cervical/pap-testing.html> or these helpful websites:

- **Medline Plus:** <https://medlineplus.gov/cervicalcancerscreening.html>
- **American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists:** <https://www.acog.org/Patients/FAQs/Cervical-Cancer-Screening>
- **HealthFinder.gov:** https://healthfinder.gov/HealthTopics/Category/doctor-visits/screening-tests/get-tested-for-cervical-cancer#the-basics_1

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